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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 VATICAN 000111

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SUBJECT: VATICAN EXPECTS STRONG REACTION TO POPE'S LETTER TO CHINESE FAITHFUL

REF: A. Vatican 0061

- [1](#)B. Vatican 0054
- [1](#)C. Vatican 0030
- [1](#)D. Shanghai 00412

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CLASSIFIED BY: Christopher J. Sandrolini, Charge, Embassy Vatican.

REASON: 1.4 (b), (d)

[1](#)1. (C) Summary: According to Holy See MFA Country Director for PRC Rota Graziosi, the Pope's China Letter has undercut the standing of the Government of China in "administering" the Catholic Church in China and as a result, the Holy See expects a strong, but perhaps, moderated reaction sometime later this year. The Letter, which the Holy See identifies as religious, not political, calls on the faithful in the "unofficial" and "official" church communities to reconcile their differences and form one unified Catholic Church in communion with Rome. The Pope asks that members of the "underground" church practice openly, and that members of the "official" church ensure their open allegiance to the Holy See. The Holy See also makes clear that religious freedom for its faithful in China takes priority over formalizing diplomatic relations. End Summary

A Religious Letter - Not A Political Document

[1](#)2. (C) Monsignor Gianfranco Rota Graziosi told us July 5 that the Pope's Letter to Chinese Catholics (released on June 30) was purely a religious message and should not be viewed as a political message directed at the Government of China (GoC). "The Pope is speaking directly to the Chinese Catholic faithful in his letter," said Rota Graziosi. It was for that reason that the Holy See sought to eliminate any potential misperception by including a "Declaration" with the Letter and its explanatory note. The Declaration states "the Letter is directed to the Church in China and deals with eminently religious questions...it is not, therefore a political document, nor much less an indictment of the government authorities." Rota Graziosi explained that, in part, the Holy See delayed the Letter's promulgation to develop and include the Declaration with the Letter.

¶3. (C) Comment: While the Holy See may insist that the Pope's letter is not political, the Letter does delve into church-state matters (e.g. Chinese Bishops Conference statutes) and explicitly signals to the GoC what issues are open to negotiation (e.g. diocese divisions) and what issues are not (e.g. episcopal appointment of bishops). End comment.

The Pope Has Spoken Clearly, With Truth and Love

¶4. (C) The Pope's letter was urgently needed to help clarify the many religious questions and issues raised to the Holy See by China's bishops and priests, according to Rota Graziosi. For too long the Chinese faithful have had no clear direction and as a result, there has been a great deal of confusion and misunderstanding regarding the relationship between the "official" and "underground" communities, and the relation of the Church community with the civil authorities. The Letter leaves no doubt as to the Pope's policy.

¶5. (C) In his Letter, the Pope acknowledges the suffering of the underground community and its refusal to cooperate with the government, but also expresses his understanding that the official community cooperated with the government for the good of the faithful. The Pope's message to the faithful is that there can only be one Catholic Church; therefore, the two communities must reconcile. "The Pope wishes to be very clear on this point," said Rota Graziosi, emphasizing that both the underground and official communities have a responsibility to take concrete steps to reconcile and become one Catholic community.

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Come Out Into the Light and Be Recognized

¶6. (C) Rota Graziosi explained that a church which is not in communion with Rome is not the Catholic Church, which is why the Pope made clear to the Chinese faithful that they must ensure all their bishops, and priests are in communion with the Holy See. The Letter states that only the Pope can appoint bishops to ensure the unity of the Church and the apostolic succession of bishops - these are purely religious appointments with no political character.

¶7. (C) The Letter states that a clandestine church is not a normal situation and because circumstances in China have changed (for the better), Pope Benedict has revoked all prior special concessions and asks the underground community to come forward and register with the civil authorities wherever and whenever circumstances permit. By this, the Pope does not mean that underground churches should register with the Chinese Patriotic Association (PA), only to the civil authorities as would be required by any non-governmental organization. Official recognition is especially important for our underground bishops, said Rota Graziosi, so they can participate in the already

existing Chinese Bishops Conference. That Conference is now illegitimate, he said, because it fails to include all bishops recognized by Rome and includes bishops who are not so recognized.

18. (C) The Pope also asks members of the official community to take steps to demonstrate their allegiance to the Holy See. Regarding official bishops appointed or recognized by the Holy See, the Pope asks that they make their apostolic appointments public; while those bishops not yet in communion with Rome are asked to clarify their status publicly. In this manner the Church in China can become a fully functioning community in communion with the Holy See.

Religious Freedom First, Diplomatic Relations A Distant Second

19. (C) Rota Graziosi told us that religious freedom for the Chinese faithful is the Holy See's primary goal. The issue of diplomatic relations is a distant second. What is most important is that all Catholics in China have the opportunity to practice their faith in the open, and that their bishops are in communion with the Holy See. "Whether diplomatic relations occur or not is not in the forefront of our concerns - in fact, we would be just as pleased with a apostolic delegate if that were possible" said Rota Graziosi.

Government of China will be Embarrassed and Angry

110. (C) Rota Graziosi expressed his hope that the GoC would accept the Pope's Letter as a religious message, but based on his early assessment of their public statements, he told us that the GoC is not pleased. "The Pope has pulled the ground out from under them with his Letter," said Rota Graziosi, predicting that the authorities would be embarrassed and angry. The fact that State Administrator for Religious Affairs Ye Xiaowen stated that the Holy See was attempting to "internationalize" the letter by having it translated into different languages is an indication of the depth of their embarrassment, according to Rota Graziosi, who expects a reaction sometime this fall in reaction to the Letter.

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111. (C) Another Rome-based China expert, Father Bernardo Cervellera of the Pontifical Institute for Foreign Missions, told us July 6 that he also expected a strong reaction from the GoC. That said, Cervellera thought the GoC's reaction would be well disguised, as the Chinese would not wish to detract from their pre-Olympic PR effort aimed at demonstrating their maturity and forbearance as the "Loving Country."

Comment

¶12. (C) The Holy See's hope is that the Pope's letter will begin a slow process of reconciliation between the unofficial and official communities. The Vatican believes the Church has become too big and open for the GoC to control it in any other manner other than oppression, which may not be palatable now; consequently, accommodation may be a more likely road. The Holy See has put clarity and adherence to doctrinal fundamentals before the hope for formalized relations. This candid and uncompromising approach is a hallmark of Pope Benedict's style.

SANDROLINI